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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [IZ](#) [IR](#)  
SUBJECT: KARBALA: DA'WA, ISCI COMPETE FOR APATHETIC VOTERS

REF: A. BAGHDAD 2316  
[1](#)B. BAGHDAD 2124

Classified By: Team Leader Don Cooke for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

This is a PRT Karbala Reporting Cable.

[1](#)1. (S) Summary: Amid widespread voter apathy among Karbalans concerning the political process, members of the two dominant parties -- Da'wa and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) -- are jockeying for position in the run-up to provincial elections. Da'wa increasingly appears to have the upper hand, with its newly developed tribal links strengthening its already dominant position. Contacts indicate, however, that intra-Da'wa rivalry between the Governor and the Iraqi Security Forces may be responsible for a series of small explosions here, the latest of which killed one person. End Summary.

Why Bother Vote?

[1](#)2. (S) A variety of contacts report that Karbalans of all stripes are dispirited by what they perceive as politics as usual. Many newly eligible voters have not bothered to register despite a vigorous media campaign -- undertaken by the national government, the United Nations, and various NGOs -- urging them to do so. According to UNAMI, only 264 new registrations have been recorded since the province's 20 election offices opened in August. To put this figure into context, in January 2006, MNF-I counted 787,072 eligible voters in Karbala, 423,264 of whom already were registered from the previous election.

[1](#)3. (S) Some politicians are equally discouraged. Independent Provincial Council (PC) member Mohsen al-Kenani told the PRT on September 9 that at least eight of the PC's 36 members do not plan to seek re-election. He stated that Karbala's hawzas -- Shi'a seminaries -- are pressing independent PC members to affiliate with one or the other of the two dominant religious parties here, Da'wa or ISCI. Candidates wishing to retain their autonomy must be from a prominent tribe or otherwise have sufficient name recognition to prevail against party-backed opponents; few possess such advantages (Al-Kenani is himself the head of a powerful tribe). Al-Kenani continued that Judge Qassim al-Aboudi, national chairman of the Government Election Office (GEO), visited Karbala last month to announce that voters whose personal data have changed can update their registrations via cell phone by dialing 7777 on a cell phone. In spite of this, he observed gloomily, relatively few people (UNAMI says 2,152) here have called. Meanwhile, some of the provincial election offices have yet to receive a single visitor.

Deputy Governor Spot Still Unfilled

[1](#)4. (S) Note: According to Kenani, Acting PC Chairman Abd al-Al al-Yasiri (also an independent) selected him to fill the deputy governor position, vacant since the formal resignation in late August of Jawad Kadhum Husayn al-Hasnawi.

Unfortunately, he continued, Governor Aqeel Mahmoud al-Khazali (Da'wa) does not wish to share the political limelight with anyone -- particularly in the run-up to the provincial elections -- and has blocked all attempts to hold a vote on al-Hasnawi's replacement (a protege of Prime Minister Maliki, Aqeel is believed by our contacts to be angling for a federal sinecure). Similarly, the PC, wishing to avoid any controversy, will not schedule a vote to replace al-Yasiri, according to al-Kenani. See ref A for details. End Note.

#### Delay Benefiting Religious Parties?

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15. (S) Against this sobering backdrop, government officials belonging to Da'wa are using the resources at their disposal to shore up their support in advance of the provincial elections. Independent PC member Hamid al-Hilali (who serves as secretary to Acting PC Chairman Abd al-al-Yasiri and has yet to decide whether he will run again) said on September 10 that time is the greatest ally of the religious parties: a delay in balloting until late 2008 will enable incumbents affiliated with Shi'a parties to use the emotions associated with the month of Muharram (which begins December 30) -- and especially Ashura (which will correspond to January 7) -- to boost their campaigns. Al-Hilali stated that Da'wa is counting on the backing of Karbala's tribal council, which counts some 400 clan leaders among its 12 branches, to propel its candidates to victory. He added that, to ensure the tribes' loyalty, each sheikh currently receives \$100 per month as a "gift" from Da'wa. See Ref B for background on Da'wa's outreach to the tribes.

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#### Da'wa in the Driver's Seat

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16. (S) With provincial elections still unscheduled and voter registration low (septel), government officials belonging to Karbala's dominant Da'wa party are using the resources at their disposal to shore up their electoral support. According to Independent Provincial Council member Hamid al-Hilali (who serves as secretary to Provincial Council (PC) Chairman Abd al-Yasiri and has yet to decide whether he will run again) Al-Hilali stated that Da'wa is counting on the backing of Karbala's tribal council, which counts some 400 clan leaders among its 12 branches, to propel its candidates to victory. He added that, to ensure the tribes' loyalty, each sheikh currently receives \$100 per month as a "gift" from Da'wa. (See Ref B for background on Da'wa's outreach to the tribes.)

17. (S) Da'wa is the strongest political party in Karbala and a number of top provincial leaders either formally or tacitly belong to the party, according to al-Hilali. These include Aqeel ; ISF commander MG Ra'ad Shaker Jawdat al-Hasnawi and his deputy, MAJ Ali Hamid Hashim; Kadhum Abd al-Zahra al-Hur, the head of the Shi'a Waqf; and the Directors-General of Health, Education, Agriculture, and Environment. Da'wa also holds a plurality of seats on the Provincial Council. Al-Hilali continued that Da'wa has moved into the vacuum created by the Sadrists' implosion following last year's deadly Shabaniyah debacle to position members in the top echelons of many key institutions in the province. The military and police in particular, he said, are filled with Da'wa loyalists.

#### Da'wa Split Creating Security Issues?

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18. (S) Al-Hilali went on to describe a split between Da'wa's politicians, headed by Aqeel, and its military wing, led by MAJ Ali. Asked why BG Ra'ad was not the boss of the latter, al-Hilali replied that although Ra'ad appears to be the ISF strongman here, in fact he is a front for Ali, who wields the

real power. Mutual loathing characterizes the relationship between the two Da'wa factions and, according to knowledgeable observers here, may be the genesis of a string of at least five small explosions in downtown Karbala during the last two months, with the latest -- two blasts 30 minutes apart on the evening of September 10 -- resulting in one fatality. (Note: The explosions of September 10 occurred on the same day that Aqeel -- reflecting complaints from businessmen and others -- announced the province would not be "held captive" to security measures and promised to "shut down" 76 police checkpoints and 90 observation towers. End Note.)

Comment

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19. (S) All of our interlocutors, official and non-official alike, have remarked in recent weeks on how the populace is "fed up" with politics as usual. Instead of voicing protest or mobilizing themselves to "throw the bums out," Karbalans appear content to sit on their hands. This apathy is enabling Da'wa and, to a lesser extent, ISCI, to position themselves to take maximum advantage of the balloting when it occurs. End comment.  
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